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Harder Than It Looks Dept: Raul Gomez feeds a poster into the mounting machine to be adhered to a foam core board. The boards come with adhesive on one side. The machine heats to 300 degrees, melting the adhesive and fixing the poster to the board, which is then cut to match the shape of the poster.



Photos by Jimmy Stroup

Metro's Copy Center: From Brochures to Braille Documents

- Veteran printing crew averages 2 million copies a month, 3 million during shake-ups

By JIMMY STROUP

(Aug. 14, 2007) More than likely, this very day, you touched or looked at something that the Metro Copy Center made for you. A brochure, a bus or rail schedule – even the mounted posters on easels in the lobbies.

But like so much of their work, you didn't wonder who made it. You assumed it appeared there, as it always does. And that's one of the functions of the six men and women of the Copy Center: providing the printed material reproduction that keeps Metro on time and in the know, seamlessly and quietly.

Thomas Rodriguez, a 25-year Metro veteran, runs the outfit, and has for 6 years. There's not a moment of his day that isn't spent monumentally busy, filling print orders from every corner of the agency. His job is to make sure that his staff – most of whom have been in the printing business as long as, or longer than, Rodriguez – get the material correct and out to their customers on time.

So you figure the Copy Center does the big printing jobs, anything over

50 pages? Yes they do. But that's only the beginning.

In their 150-by-60 foot area on the 15th floor, the Copy Center can laminate, create oversize engineering schematics, make business cards, create writing pads, and mount posters onto foam board used for presentations agency-wide. They cut, staple, bind and fold nearly all the printed material Metro uses to keep its employees and customers on track.

"The little notes you get in your check? We copy and fold them here, cut them to fit," said Raul Gomez, lead photo copying operator.



Raul Gomez (standing) and Hung Phan instruct a computer program to interpret a Word document into Braille and print it at the adjoining machine. Each printout takes about 2 minutes to complete, making it a slow process for multi-paged documents or large orders.

Word documents into Braille

The Copy Center even has a machine that can convert Word documents into Braille, the raised dots that represent words and numbers for the blind. Gomez and Hung Phan, the two in the office who have the most experience with that particular machine, say they get one or two orders a month for Braille translation, and mostly it's the agendas for the board meetings.

"There've been times when we've bound it upside down," Gomez said, indicating that the printed Braille documents don't have any markings on them to clue the sighted into things as simple as page number or orientation. "We've had to learn Braille a little ourselves so we can put it together correctly."

While the translation process is almost instantaneous with the computer, the Braille printer is a little slower – 2 minutes per page – than the regular printers, which print 115 pages a minute.

"It took me over 2 hours to do a two-page document once, because I had to make so many copies," Phan said.

Their bread and butter, though, is the standard printing of schedules and anything else Metro might need, printed on regular old 8 ½ by 11. But how much paper could it be to fulfill a month of Metro's needs?

The Copy Center averages more than 2 million copies a month.

"You'd think that e-mail would reduce some of that," Rodriguez said. "But we still do generate a lot of paper."

To put that number into perspective, a ream of paper you use in your office printer is 500 sheets. Stacked, the amount of paper generated by Metro in a single month would be 666 feet tall, longer than two football fields. When weighed, it comes to almost 26,000 pounds of paper and costs (at the cheapest prices from Xerox.com) roughly \$27,000.



The Copy Center staff produces 2 to 3 million copies a month. From left: Hung Phan, Nina Sanchez, Luis Hernandez, Thomas Rodriguez (seated), Raul Gomez, and MaryLou Algallar.

3 million copies a month

And the numbers during the bi-annual shake-ups are even more impressive, when they can average 3 million copies in a single month.

"Yeah, it's huge during shake-up. All the new bus schedules and the new lines," said Gomez. "Pretty much the whole bus system changes and we have to make new stuff when that happens."

The Copy Center is so busy all the time that they, sadly, have no time to appreciate the view they have of Union Station and downtown Los Angeles from their 15th floor perch at Metro Headquarters.

"Most of the time you'll find these shops in the basement, but not here," Rodriguez said. "We have a great view."

The Copy Center has new machines to look forward to in the near future. The contract with Xerox ends and Metro's replacing the 5-year-old machines with Toshiba models. Functionally, they'll be the same, and will work with the same software they've been using.

In the meantime, the Copy Center will continue to quietly, seamlessly, provide the almost literal river of paper that keeps Metro afloat. Rodriguez and his crew have been doing it for years. They know how to keep up.